

Requiem

When a person dies, their family grieves for them. They cry and shout and mope. They dress up the body and lay it to rest in the earth. They cover the stone with flowers and visit every week. Every room has their picture and everyone has a story to tell. I've always envied these people. They are allowed to remember. They're allowed to mourn.

There were no stories growing up about the many dead we had. No stories about Grandma and her cookies or Grandpa as a Vietnam vet. Aunt Suzie was a mystery and our little cousin Troy a figment of imagination. There were no tombstones to visit and no flowers to give as gifts. Mama would smile when I asked, but she'd never say a word. *Don't worry over the dead*, she'd say. *The living have trouble enough*.

It never bothered Kelly or Lissy, to not know about the dead. Kelly tried her best to smile and that was so much like Mama to me. Lissy got all quiet, because Aunt Suzie was her mama and she wanted only to forget. But no one could forget when they looked at her and the red hair that always stuck out. *Just like Suzie*, Mama said, the only time she caved.

I went to a funeral for God when I was seven. It was a double funeral on a rainy Sunday, because we weren't just burying God. There were no tears because Papa would get mad, and the closest we had to flowers were weeds. A hole in the earth, a few feet deep, not six feet like it should. No ornate box, polished wood fixed with steel or silver. Instead a bloody tarp from the tool shed wrapped around the broken body of an angel. Papa gave a mighty kick and in tumbled the body, already bruised, already beaten. Mama was a statue as she tossed the dirt on the corpse, thud, thud, thud. The dirt turned to mud and Mama's hands bled on the shovel handle and still she stayed there until the body was hidden. There was no silent prayers or hymns as Mama took her rosary and left it in the mud.

We pretended they hadn't existed. I didn't have a big sister and I'd never had a cousin. Mama walked around with a bottle of gin and I wondered if she'd forgotten I existed too. Papa complained about the usual-cigarettes prices going up, Mama's value going down, and wondering how long it would be 'til I would be worth selling. I claimed a shadowy corner and never said a word. Because even though I would pretend to forget for Mama, I promised I'd remember in secret.

Mama cried one day, crying out for Kelly. I wanted to cry too, but I did an awful thing instead. I said there was no Kelly, that Mama was making stuff up. I felt sick when she pushed me away and curled up with Kelly's shirt. She cried out for Lissy, begging her to come home. I didn't argue this time, because I didn't think I could. I just hugged Mama as hard as I could and waited. Papa came into the room, telling Mama to stop. Mama kept on crying, crying out for Kelly. Papa told me to get out, but I just hugged Mama tighter. I didn't want to leave her alone, not with him. Papa threw me out of the room and I knew he was mad. He told me to be quiet as he slammed the door and locked it.

Papa started yelling and that scared me worse than the crying. I heard the mattress squeak, heard Mama yell back for the first time ever. There was a smack, a thump, a curse I wasn't meant to hear. Mama called him 'bastard', said he'd killed her babies. *You killed her, you killed them both.* Papa called her worthless, a useless piece of trash. *I lost an investment. I lost the both of them.* There was crashing and yelling and I wanted to go deaf. No more yelling or crying. There was no Kelly to hold my hand or Melissa to say *it's okay*. I covered my ears as the yelling got louder, Mama calling him bad names she'd wash my mouth out for. There was a loud bang, and I knew Papa had his gun. I'd never seen him shoot it, but he would pull it out and threaten Mama when he got drunk. I started crying because I knew what was coming-another funeral. There was another bang and then silence and then a thump. The door opened and there was Papa holding his gun with blood on his face. He didn't look at me and didn't yell, just grabbed his keys and left. The whiny roar of his truck, the screech of his tires, hurtling away towards the bar.

I knew what he had done, what I could expect beyond the door. I didn't want to go in there, didn't want to see her. But I did go in there. I held Mama's hand and gave her a kiss and tried to pretend that the wet patches were tears. I let go of her hand and went into the room I has shared with my sister and cousin. I took a worn blue backpack and filled it with my clothes. I found the money Mama hid, that she'd stolen when Papa was drunk, in the peanut butter jar like she'd shown me. Sandwiches and apple juice and a blanket that smelled like Kelly. I visited my sister, digging through dirt for a discarded pink rosary and finally saying goodbye. I found the gas for the grill, soaked the carpet and cupboards, splashed it on the walls. I stood out on the porch with a pack of Papa's matches. A quick swipe, just like Lissy showed me. Heat and pain and a flick of my fingers. I walked away and never looked back.

We were never allowed to bury our dead, not the way we should've. So I did the next best thing for Mama and sent her up in flames.